

Developing Visual Memory in Reading

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At the root of many reading (decoding) problems is a failure to develop solid visual memory for words. This skill is essential for

- **rapid and accurate identification of words** and
- **accurate spelling.**

Here is a sentence written by a child who shows this problem

Ontell a srot time agow pepell cod not get to the mon

(Until a short time ago, people could not get to the moon.)

The following is a series of steps to follow to develop visual long term memory.

1. **Selecting the Level:** Start at a level of the program (or another book) that the child can read with 90% accuracy. Select two sentences.

2. **Writing the Words:** Have the child read one sentence. Following that, you show one word at a time. Then you cover the word, and ask the child to write it. If the writing is correct, you move on --doing each word in this manner. The child is responsible for punctuation and capitalization. You tell him that at the start, but do not point it out when he gets to a part of the sentence that demands either punctuation or capitalization.

If the child makes an error at any point, you take away the paper, but do not discuss the error. Then you provide fresh paper and have him/her start the writing from the first word – even if it is the last word that contained the error. Remember, you remove the paper at the first sign of error.

By stopping the child at the point of error, s/he is being offered a major clue as to where and what the error might be. It may take a few days for that realization to take place, but it almost always does. Keep in mind that this is a highly structured situation so that the identification of the error is limited and not overwhelming. Structuring the situation in this way leads to more self-directed action – which is a key goal in all learning. This does not happen when a child relies on the adult for direction.

That being said, it is of course appropriate to inform the child at the first session as to how you are going to proceed. You can also do a "trial run" so s/he experiences what is going to happen. Then for the first couple of errors, if the child seems confused, you can point out the error and restart the sentence.

3. Increasing the Span: At this point, the child is probably not "seeing" the words, but rather is retaining them by saying the letter names. You want to discourage that --since as long as a child relies on letter naming, s/he will not develop the necessary visual memory. You develop the skill by increasing the number of words done each time (e.g., up to four at one time) thereby "overloading" the naming strategy (i.e., a child generally cannot remember the letters in a sequence of four words so s/he has to abandon the strategy). So once s/he is comfortable with one word, increase the span to two words, then to three words and then to four words (the process may take about 2-4 weeks).

You do the second sentence in the same manner as above, following steps 2-3.

The key issue is not that the child is writing sentences. All the work is in sentences. The key issue concerns the presentation – specifically, the child sees a word or words of the sentence and then writes it/them. This continues until the whole sentence is completed. Typically when a child sees one word, they label the letters (as they have been taught). This actually works against visual memory. Once they are required to do 3-4 words at one time, labeling of letters fails and they then develop visual memory to hold onto the information that they have to write. It's fine to do a single word at a time for a few sessions till your child becomes comfortable with the activity. But as soon as you can, move up to 2 and then 3-4 words. There is rarely a need to do more than 4 words at a time. And when the words are multi-syllable (e.g., comfortable) reduce the number to 1 or 2 words at a time.

4. Writing Without a Model-After a Delay: After a delay of 30 minutes or more, you have the child again write one of the sentences. Say, "We are doing one of the sentences again--but this time, you cannot see the words." You select one of the sentences the child did that day (Do not allow him/her to make the selection). You dictate the words of the sentence—without showing him/her any of the words. Here s/he is allowed to make one error in the writing or punctuation. If there is a second error, you immediately stop him/her and repeat all of the earlier writing done that day (following steps 2-3 above)

5. Frequency: The technique should be used a minimum of four to five times a week. Generally significant improvement is attained within 6-8 weeks. Once a child has shown one week of solid performance (i.e., s/he can achieve accurate step 4 writing 80% of the time), the level of the work should be increased (so that the child moves up to handling more complex material.)

Once the child is comfortably and accurately writing at grade level material, the program can be reduced to twice a week. If progress is maintained under that regimen for two or more weeks, the program can be discontinued. If, at any point, there is a decline, the program can be re-instated till solid performance is again achieved.